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ABSTRACT

Readers are "dumb" because they are not privy to the mind and intentions of the writer; and the failure of the unsuccessful writer is a failure to forecast what it is going to be like to be a dumb reader of the document. Sample sentences from students' writing illustrate the following types of writing problems, which force the reader to examine the sentences a second time: problems of punctuation that fail to mark the structure of the sentence and assist the intended meaning; problems with "it," "this," and "which," classifiable under the traditional rubric of "vague reference"; problems with sentence structure and word choice that interfere with consistency of persona; problems with word order that produce a "wall-eyed" modifier; and problems with familiar phrases that can be semantically understood in more than one way. In almost none of the cases is there any real doubt about what the writer meant to say, suggesting that the problem with the student writers is not that they think badly but simply that they do not write very well. (GT)

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THE WRITING TEACHER AS A DUMB READER

Some Notes on Clarity

My first object as a teacher of writing is to dramatise for my students how dumb a reader is. "No one," I tell them, "will ever again in your lifetime read what you have written as carefully and attentively as I am doing right now." That boast may or may not prove true: my purpose is to convince them how easily and often a careful and attentive reader can go wrong. "Consider your dumb reader," I plead, meaning me.

The reader is "dumb" because he is not privy to the mind and intentions of the writer, in advance. The reader is dumb because he simply has to respond to the signals on the page, as he sees them. The failure of the unsuccessful writer is a failure of imagination, a failure to forecast what it's going to be like to be a dumb reader of the document. The process of revision is precisely an effort at role-playing, at anticipating the qualms and hesitations, the false starts and wrong turns, that one's reader will undergo.

All this is very familiar. In his Philosophy of Composition (1977), E. D. Hirsch is telling us now about "relative readability," and what he mostly means by that dreadful phrase is false starts and wrong turns. And he's the first to acknowledge the commonplace character of his admonitions. In fact some of his strongest support comes from old Herbert Spencer ("The Philosophy of Style," 1852):

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> A reader or listener has at each moment but a limited amount of mental power available. To recognize and interpret the symbols presented to him requires part of this power; to arrange and combine the images suggested by them requires a further part; and only that part which remains can be used for framing the thought expressed. Hence the more time and attention it takes to receive and understand each sentence, the less time and attention can be given to the contained idea; and the less vividly will that idea be conceived.

Hirsch goes on to say flatly that "a prose style requiring a second perusal is never justified if such a style can be avoided." (There's an escape hatch here for deliberate literary ambiguity, where presumably it can't and shouldn't be avoided, where it's part of the purposeful performance.)

My life as a reader of student prose is full of second perusals -- sometimes that's about all it is. Back-tracking to see where I, the dumb reader, went wrong. Which is to say, of course, where the writer went wrong, in failing to set up signals that would keep me going down the intended route. The writer went wrong in failing to imagine how things would turn out for me, for any dumb reader.

In a recent Chronicle of Higher Education (April 3, 1978), Donald Freeman takes Hirsch to task for being too deductive, for failing to dirty his hands in the mud of actual student prose. Well, maybe so. As Freeman suggests, to categorize and make systematic all the ways students actually do go wrong is practically impossible. Still one is moved to try, to begin. Why not be inductive, then, for a bit, and see where it takes us?

Here on my desk, as usual, is a pile of student papers, in various genres and manifesting various levels of competence and sophistication. They present huge and complex problems of organization and argument, style and tone, defying summary. But the kinds of anxious moments suffered by this dumb reader can be illustrated even in very simple passages divorced from context. What makes me back-track? What forces that second perusal?

1) Though yesterday was really Tuesday, throughout the world it was Monday at the University of Massachusetts.

Here my back-tracking is caused by nothing more complicated than a misplaced comma. But I doubt that a review of comma rules will much help this student. "Read the sentence aloud," is all I know to say to her. "Read it aloud and listen to yourself. Has your punctuation signal reflected your own voice as it utters the sentence? Now what part of your sentence does 'throughout the world' belong with?"

(The student's sentence was responding to an exercise in which the class addressed the paradox caused by the university calendar when, on a certain Tuesday, "Monday class schedule will be followed." So on Wednesday we could say: "Yesterday was really Monday. Of course it was <u>really</u> Tuesday." The students were asked to comment on this paradox with special attention to the meaning of "really.")

2) A cool breeze swirled off the hill-side ruffling his camouflage overalls, it was cold and damp and he instinctively recoiled against it.

The problem here is in the ambiguity of the first "it." I read the phrase as mere weather report: "it was cold and damp." The writer meant both "its" to refer to the cool breeze. When I reach the second "it" I'm lost, and have to back-track.

Should we take note of the comma splice? For me the comma splice does not demand back-tracking; it interferes in no way with "readability" except that the (dumb) reader will be making some inferences from it about the persona of the piece. Do you (I ask the author in conference) really want to project a voice as loose-jointed and nonchalant as the punctuation of your first sentence implies? If so, OK. But you're committed: you're going to have to maintain this easy-going style and character later on.

3) Stockbridge is a practical school with little emphasis on the "well-rounded education" bit and I'm used to this.

If "it" is the hardest word to use decently in the English language, the second hardest word to use decently is "this." Both "it" and "this" carry responsibility; they imply a concrete reference to some thing. Here -- and this (!) is unusal in my experience as a reader of student prose -- there may be some genuine doubt about what the student is trying to say, although even here we can be pretty sure

of his meaning within fairly narrow limits. "During my long life with schools, I have been accustomed to systems that have no aspiration to provide a 'well-rounded education,' and therefore Stockbridge comes as no surprise." Or: "Thanks to my experience at Stockbridge, I have become accustomed to an educational system that does not aspire to be 'well-rounded.'"

4) Replacement cost ruling is not without its strong opponents. The reaction by corporations and accountants has not been that favorable, most of which would have preferred general price level adjustments to financial statements which would have been much easier and less costly to implement.

This one, by a major in accounting, may deserve a more detailed treatment.

4a) The reactions by corporations and accountants has not been that favorable . . .

Problem with voice and tone. We back-track to remind ourselves who's talking: it is that sober and dignified persona who uses expressions like "not without its strong opponents." "That favorable" is colloquial; the character of the voice momentarily alters without any justification visible to this dumb reader. The expression "that" or "all that" before a modifier is currently so commonplace in the oral language and it's become difficult to

recognize as colloquial in formal writing. This is an error of consistency, caused by innocence and ignorance, that is, of course, by lack of sufficient reading experience.

4b) most of which would have preferred . . .

What's which? Reactions? Or corporations and accountants? Absolutely no doubt about what the writer means, but it takes a moment to be sure. By changing "which" to "whom" we can make immediately clear that we're talking about people, corporations and accountants.

4c) . . . most of which (whom) would have preferred general price level adjustments to financial statements which would have been easier and less costly to implement.

Another fierce "which" problem. Which of the alternatives, general price level adjustments or financial statements, are easier and less costly to implement. It's fairly clear from the context, and absolutely clear in following sentences, that it's the general price level adjustments that are easier and less costly. After all, they're preferred, and that's why they're preferred. But a lot of backtracking is necessary to discover that fact; it's obscured, of course, because we're invited by their proximity to identify "which" with "financial statements." Revise?

. . . would have preferred general price level adjustments to financial statements. Their argument is that the price level adjustments are easier and less costly to implement.

5) I jump out of bed and run down to the sundeck on Manomet Bluffs. Looking out to the sea my brother, Jim, points out the tanker just beneath the sun.

Here the dumb reader experiences a split-second moment when the person looking out to sea has to be the "I" of the first sentence. But no, it turns out to be brother Jim. This is not a problem of the dangling participle, at least not in any textbook sense. Nevertheless, "looking out" is a wall-eyed modifier, for that split second. "My brother Jim, looking out to the sea, points out . . ." (And now let's get rid of one of those "outs.")

6) At the end of the summer our group had an overnight retreat at Windsor Jambs State Park. This time offered us an opportunity to show our love for one another and God.

Another split second of discomfort experienced by the dumb reader. "This time" at first blush was construed by me as "At this time." "This time we were offered an opportunity . . ." But no, it's the subject of the sentence. This retreat? This experience?

On the basis of six little passages, can one make any generalizations about "second perusals"? One might at least list some problems:

Problems of punctuation which, by failing to signal the pauses of the oral voice, fail to mark the structure of the sentence and assist the intended meaning. (1)

Problems with "it," "this," and "which," classifiable probably under the traditional rubric of "vague reference." (2, 3, 4)
Problems with both sentence structure and word choice as they interfere with consistency of persona. (2, 4)
Problems with word order that produce a wall-eyed modifier. (5)
Problems with familiar phrases that can be semantically understood in more than one way. (6)

But I'm by no means convinced that such a listing is very helpful. Should I "teach" these "problems" in the abstract? I doubt it. I'll just wait for more examples to turn up. They will.

Many an embattled warrior in the trenches of open admission will object, perhaps, that my list contains relatively elegant lapses in any case, and that I'm speaking from a privileged position where students already know how to connect a subject and a verb. There's something in that, no doubt. In this era of errors and expectations, should we not spend all our energies on the truly illiterate who are most in need? But the answer is no. It's true that my samples were composed by sophomores and juniors in an elective writing course at a university that does not (quite) operate with open admissions. But these students need help, I'm persuaded, almost as desperately as Ms Shaugnessy's students. That young accountant (4) is a very bright fellow whose clarity in written prose may well be crucial in his future life. Right now his writing is awful. There are those, he informs me, who have told him that.

But who has told him what to do, in concrete situations of muddlement? Certainly not his accounting teachers. At the risk of sounding defensive, I acknowledge no embarrassment about my mission with students such as these.

Finally, there is a generalization I'm prepared to make, out of this small display. It concerns writing and thinking. In none of these cases -- well, almost none of them -- was there any lasting doubt about what the writer meant to say. After back-tracking and scratching his head, as noted, even the dumb reader could figure out a clear intended meaning. We have been fond of intoning that when a student writes badly, that means he thinks badly. I no longer quite believe that. The problem with my students is not at all with their thinking, at least so far as my samples here are concerned. My students think just fine; in each case the student knew perfectly well just what she or he was trying to convey. My students don't write very well, that's all. And I'm a dumb reader in order to help them do something about that.